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November 17, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Our Cuban Policy, 1959-1960

You inquired about the letter written by Gabriel Kolko (a Harvard Ph.D. now teaching in Australia) and published in the New York Times on November 9.

I asked Philip Bonsal, who was our Ambassador to Cuba in this period, and Theodore Draper, who is the best outside student of the rise of the Castro movement, to comment on the Kolko letter. I now attach the following documents: (A) a letter from Bonsal; (B) a letter from Draper; (C) a memorandum from Draper; and (D) a letter from Draper to the New York Times, which was published on November 16.

All these documents are of interest. One point on which the writers seem to agree is that our Cuban policy in 1959-60 was unimaginative and sterile. Bonsal says that, far from having forced an unwilling Castro into the arms of the Communists, "if we are to be criticized, it is for having facilitated his elimination of the obstacles he faced in his determined rush into those arms." Draper mentions our total obliviousness to the struggle taking place in Cuba in 1959 between the pro-Communist and anti-Communist wings of the Revolution. Both suggest that a more flexible policy might have kept a wider range of alternatives open to the United States.

You might be particularly interested in pp. 3-7 of the Draper memorandum (C) because of its attempt to apply to the present situation the lessons of our failure in 1959-60.

My own view of the questions raised by the Kolko letter is as follows:

(1) Castro had been for some years before 1959 a romantic revolutionary nationalist with strong Marxist leanings, though there is no hard evidence of active collaboration on his part with the Communists in the period 1953-58 (indeed, the Communist Party of Cuba specifically attacked him during parts of this period)

(2) on coming to power, Castro rather quickly decided that the Communists could help him most both in ruling Cuba and in advancing his leadership in the hemisphere;

(3) probably no United States policy could have prevented Castro's movement into the Soviet orbit;

(4) the policy we followed was not at all one of rigid rejection; in point of fact, we stood ready to provide Castro with economic assistance when he came to Washington in April 1959, but he had expressly instructed his colleagues not to raise the matter;

(5) thereafter, our policy, far from seizing on every pretext for anti-Castro action, remained one of restraint: we did not suspend sugar purchases, for example, until six months after the anti-Communists had been driven from the government and the Communist party had become the only party on Cuba with freedom of political action.

(6) nonetheless our policy also remained comparatively unimaginative and became increasingly obsessed with the issues of expropriation and compensation to the exclusion of everything else; in this sense, it perhaps was affected by "the interests of American investors in Cuba";

(7) a more imaginative U.S. policy could have made it much harder for Castro to join the Soviet bloc; it could also have assisted and strengthened the anti-Communist wing of the Revolution and thereby might have improved the chance of Castro's overthrow from within.

Arthur Schlesinger, jr.